

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was a French composer, pianist, organist, and writer. He entered the Paris Conservatoire in 1848, and earned a reputation for his sharp tongue, strong opinions, and modernist tastes. He won the *premier prix* for organ in 1851, but failed to ever win the Prix de Rome. Following his time at the Conservatoire, Saint-Saëns held various positions as organist, where he became known for his organ improvisations.

While Saint-Saëns wrote for his primary instrument (piano) throughout his life, his orchestral writing left a strong mark. Saint-Saëns reached the height of his compositional career in the 1870s and 80s. These decades produced works of new standards for French music, with colorful orchestration and strong construction that would inspire a young Maurice Ravel. During this time, Saint-Saëns composed *Danse Macabre* and other symphonic poems, as well as his first cello sonata (1872), his first cello concerto (1872), his fourth piano concerto (1875), and his third violin concerto (1880). He also composed his much loved *Le Carnaval des Animaux* (1885-1886), though he was adamant that the work not be published in his lifetime.

While he didn't write a great deal of music for the harp, Saint-Saëns was clearly comfortable and fluent in writing for the instrument, and composed in an idiomatic style that was clearly distinct from his piano writing. He composed solo repertoire (*Fantasia Op.95*), chamber music (*Fantaisie for Harp and Violin Op.124*), and concerti for the harp (*Morceau de Concert Op.154*), in addition to including the harp in his larger orchestrations (notably *Oratorio de Noël Op.12*, *Samson et Dalila Op.47*).

Danse Macabre translates to "Dance of Death," and is a symbolic representation of death whereby one or more skeletons escort the living to the grave. Its roots can be traced back to the Middle Ages, as least as far back as Baudouin de Condé's poem *Dit des Trois Morts et des Trois Vifs* (before 1280). In the Renaissance, skeletons are depicted playing musical instruments in Guyot Marchant's book *Danse Macabre* (1485), Heinrich Knoblochzer's *Heidelberger Totentanz* (1490), and in Hans Holbein's woodcuts *Les Simulachres et Historiées Faces de La Mort*. In the 19th century, the dance of death was rekindled in Romantic imagination by Goethe's poem *Der Totentanz*, and inspired Franz Liszt's *Totentanz S.126* for piano and orchestra (1849), and Adolphe Adam's ballet *Giselle* (1841).

Le Danse Macabre was originally published in 1873 as a song for voice and piano. The French text is the poem “Égalité, Fraternité...”, and was part of Jean Lahor’s (a pseudonym of symbolist poet and physician Henri Cazalis) *l’Illusion*. An English translation of the poem follows:

*Zig, zig, zig, Death in cadence,
Striking a tomb with his heel,
Death at midnight plays a dance-tune,*

*Zig, zig, zag, on his violin.
The winter wind blows, and the night is dark;
Moans are heard in the linden trees.
White skeletons pass through the gloom,
Running and leaping in their shrouds.*

*Zig, zig, zig, each one is frisking,
You can hear the cracking of the bones of the dancers.
A lustful couple sits on the moss
So as to taste long lost delights.*

*Zig zig, zig, Death continues
The unending scraping on his instrument.
A veil has fallen! The dancer is naked.
Her partner grasps her amorously.
The lady, it’s said, is a marchioness or baroness
And her green gallant, a poor cartwright.
Horror! Look how she gives herself to him,
Like the rustic was a baron.*

*Zig, zig, zig. What a saraband!
They all hold hands and dance in circles.*

*Zig, zig, zag. You can see in the crowd
The king dancing among the peasants.
But hist! All of a sudden, they leave the dance,
They push forward, they fly; the cock has crowed.*

*Oh what a beautiful night for the poor world!
Long live death and equality!*

Saint-Saëns personally reworked *Danse Macabre* three times in his lifetime. The first incarnation was *Danse Macabre* for two pianos four hands, and was completed in late 1874 or 1875. His famous full orchestra version was transcribed in 1875 and, lastly, a version for violin and piano was transcribed in 1876. Other composers' arrangements of *Danse Macabre* include concert transcriptions for solo piano (Franz Liszt 1876), one piano four hands (Ernest Guiraud 1875), two pianos eight hands (Guiraud 1876), flute and piano (G. Gariboldi 1878), violin, cello, and piano 4 hands (D & F. 1890s), organ (Edwin H. Lemare, 1919), and accordion ensemble (Jacobi, 2013).

Saint-Saëns musically brings out the ghoulish character of the poem. He begins with 12 single notes and soft chords, symbolizing the twelve strokes of midnight. An A-natural and E-flat create a dissonant tritone, the "devil's interval." The first theme is skittishly dance-like, and the second theme is a resolute, descending scale. Midway through the tone poem, there is a fugue-like section based on the second theme. When the fugue breaks, there is a direct quotation of the *Dies Irae*, a Gregorian chant from the Requiem Mass, though its initial presentation is surprisingly in a major key. The climax of the composition combines the first and second themes in heavy polyphony reminiscent of Berlioz' *Dreams of a Witches' Sabbath* from *Symphonie Fantastique*. After an abrupt break in the textures there is a brief coda where the dawn breaks, a rooster crows, and skeletons return to their graves.

This arrangement was inspired by both Saint-Saëns' orchestral version and his two-piano version. *Danse Macabre's* polyphony is too dense to feasibly work as a harp solo, but it is only a small leap from piano duo to harp duo. Many of the prominent harp moments from his orchestral score are present, including the opening chiming notes, flowy arpeggios, and the *Dies Irae*. The two harps share melody and accompaniment duties, as the pianos do in their duet, but usually maintain their roles throughout a theme in this arrangement, rather than trading roles at the end of each phrase as in the two-piano version. Some of the musical textures and figuration have been borrowed directly from the piano scores (as in harp 2 m.176), while other techniques have been modified or substituted to be more idiomatic on the harp (like glissandos in place of rapid chromatic scales).

Score

Danse Macabre

Op. 40

Camille Saint-Saëns

arr. Erin Freund

Mouv't modéré de Valse

The score is divided into three systems, each with two staves: Harp 1 (top) and Harp 2 (bottom). The key signature is two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and the time signature is 3/4. The first system (measures 1-10) features Harp 1 with a *pp* dynamic and a series of chords in measures 5-8. Harp 2 plays a sequence of quarter notes numbered 1 through 10. The second system (measures 11-20) shows Harp 1 with a series of chords in measures 11-14. Harp 2 plays quarter notes 11 and 12, followed by a *pp* dynamic and a sequence of chords in measures 15-20. The third system (measures 21-25) features Harp 1 with a *f* dynamic and a sequence of chords in measures 21-25. Harp 2 plays a sequence of chords in measures 21-25.

Danse Macabre, Op. 40

33

Hp 1

Hp 2

Hp 1

Hp 2

50

Hp 1

Hp 2